

## Chapter 13

### Robert Portner, solid citizen: Home, family, travel and philanthropy

*[My] efforts were recognized by the whole community, and I soon became the most popular personality in town.*

Robert Portner's memoirs

*Now my beloved children, [i]t could be possible that some of you will make mistakes in life and others should help them back to the right way with love and understanding if necessary, with all means.... All of you come with the same prospects in life... use your knowledge and wealth in the right way, but: Behave well and stick together."*

An 1890 letter from Robert Portner to his children

The early family life of Robert Portner has been described in a previous chapter. Portner himself describes the benefits and the frustrations of the close professional and personal cooperation between him and his brothers and business partners. This pattern was a microcosm of the immigrant experience and of German-American efforts at self-help through entrepreneurialism in particular. Even as a small businessman in New York, Robert often lived with his siblings and partners to save money. Having relocated to wartime Alexandria, he first rented an apartment,<sup>1</sup> then a house, which he shared with his newly arrived brother Otto and sister Felixine and with partner Fred Recker. Portner's grocery and brewery were truly family operations; from their home, the extended family provided meals, likely cooked by Felixine, for their handful of employees. (Portner n.d.:7-9)

Portner and Recker purchased the seized "Lafayette House" (301 South Saint Asaph Street) from the government in 1864, and Robert, Felixine, and Fred Recker and his wife all moved there. After the war, when the Cazenove family successfully sued for the return of the property, the residents were forced to find new quarters again. This time, they set up housekeeping in two frame cottages on the site of the new brewery, Felixine Portner and niece Paula Strangmann in one, and Robert and Otto Portner sharing the other. (Portner n.d.:12,15)

During this period, the shrewd and gregarious Robert was transforming himself from a cash-strapped "carpetbagger" into one of the wealthiest pillars of the community—as an interlocutor with the government on behalf of wartime political prisoners, as a vastly popular City Council member, and as someone who could put Alexandria's underemployed labor force to work. An energetic leader, Portner bestrode the fault lines of postwar society, an outsider neither dogmatically Republican nor Democrat; a Unionist, but moderate Reconstructionist; not eschewing the trappings of wealth, but also providing charity to the less fortunate and offering more opportunity than was common to the clearly disadvantaged African Americans in town. On the latter count, it must be

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<sup>1</sup> From Mrs. Price, later the mother-in-law of Mayor (and whisky distiller) E.E. Downham. (Portner n.d.:7)

pointed out that most of Alexandria's black residents were only recently emancipated from slavery and were increasingly discriminated against by law and in practice. Portner was among the Councilmen who voted to discontinue unequal punishments for black and white convicts. He also hired African Americans for a range of positions—including common laborers, but in skilled jobs such as accountant, engineer, and assistant brewmaster as well—although there is evidence to suggest that, like many of his contemporaries, his treatment of black and white workers was not entirely equal (see page 227).

It was also during this period that Portner took a leading role in German-American community institutions, aiding German refugees of the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War, paying for Alexandria's Lutheran church steeple, founding the Harmonie Association, the German Co-operative Building Association, and the German Banking Company, and serving on the reception committee for Washington's German Day celebration. A naturalized U.S. citizen, Portner, like many other "Forty-Eighters," may have distrusted the authoritarian Prussian government, which attempted to draft him years after he left his homeland and became a U.S. citizen. Nonetheless, he always retained a fondness for his homeland, traveling there often, and even exulting in the Prussian victory over the French in 1871. He insisted that only German be spoken in his household, including by servants, as a way of educating the children. The entire family spent two years in Germany, mainly so that the children could attend the schools there. But he was obviously true to his adopted land, quickly becoming a citizen, political party member and politician. Portner served on the board of the Alexandria Agricultural Society; in the Alexandria Businessmen's League; on a committee to create a "Mount Vernon Avenue" from Washington through Alexandria to George Washington's former estate; on the Committee on Finance for the centennial celebration of the establishment of the District of Columbia; on the D.C. Board of Trade; on Washington's Liquor Dealers' Association; on the finance committee for the establishment of a permanent national exposition; on a commission to study the prospect of creating Washington's first convention center; on the reception committee for the National Drill, a meeting of militias from all over the country; on a committee to provide a memorial to former District of Columbia Governor Alexander Shepherd; and on inaugural committees for Presidents Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt. (Portner n.d.:15,20; Johnson 1983; Manassas Museum; Killmer 1984:1; Bull Run Regional Library; Cox et al. 1901:212; *Washington Post* March 1, 1878, December 20, 1884, June 5, 1886, May 19, 1887, October 5, 1887; October 5, 1890, March 30, 1893, February 9, 1896, February 18, 1896, September 27, 1902, January 26, 1904 and April 27, 1905)

It was not until 1871, after the new brewery had been in operation for two years and after most of his City Council career was behind him, that Robert Portner decided to end his bachelor life. "Up to now I had been too busy: the business required all my time. Among all the girls I knew, there was only one whose charming character pleased me so well that I wished her to be my wife." He met Anna von Valaer in 1869, while they were both guests of Christian Mathis at his Manassas, Virginia home. Anna was then just 21 years old, born April 16, 1848 at Jenaz, Canton Graubünden, Switzerland, daughter of Margaret Donau and Johann Jacob von Valär, scion of an old Swiss noble family. After arriving in America, she assisted her brother Peter at his tavern in Philadelphia. Perhaps it was love at first sight between the couple, but the courtship was not

necessarily of the “whirlwind” variety.<sup>2</sup> They were married three years later, on April 4, 1872 in Manassas, which was to become the beloved country home to the Portners. Returning to Alexandria, friends threw a second lavish reception for them. (Portner n.d.:15; Byrd; Turner 1996:269; Virginia Military Institute Archives)

Mr. Robert Portner, the prosperous and enterprising brewer of this city, and his charming bride entertained their numerous friends at Harmonie Hall last night, and no more agreeable evening was ever spent in Alexandria. Every arrangement had been made by which the pleasure of the guests could be secured and they were carried out to perfection. Dancing continued until a late hour, and was only interrupted at intervals in order that those engaged in it might partake of the most delicious refreshments. During the evening Mr. Justus Schneider on behalf of the friends of the host and hostess, presented them, in a neat and appropriate address, a handsome and valuable clock which was received by Mr. Portner in a happy response. The evening was one of unalloyed enjoyment, but

“Of all that did chance, ‘twere a long tale to tell,  
Of the dances and dresses, and who was the belle;  
But each was so happy, and all were so fair,  
That night stole away and dawn caught them there.”

*(Alexandria Gazette April 12, 1872)*

The tenderness and devotion with which Robert regarded Anna is palpable in his writings. In his memoirs, written for his children, he seldom refers to her as anything other than “your dear Mamma.” He would name one of their daughters and the family’s country estate in her honor. Robert clearly appreciated Anna’s great fortitude and kindness; she bore not only many children, but also the pain of losing so many of them at young ages. (Portner n.d.; Turner 1996:269)

Anna was pregnant almost immediately after the wedding. During the fall of 1872 Robert, having paid off his debts, began building a new, larger home to accommodate a big family. It was erected in the middle of the block on the east side of Washington Street, between Pendleton and Wythe Streets, just behind the brewery buildings. The brick house was designed in the fashionable Second Empire style. Its main block stood three stories tall, including its mansard-roofed attic story, and had a large, two-story rear ell. “We enjoyed very much to own such a beautiful home and felt very happy. I arranged the garden myself, planted all the trees and shrubs...” It may seem unusual today for the boss of an industrial firm to live so near the plant. But it was not unusual during the third quarter of the nineteenth century and was a testament to Portner’s close involvement in operations. As rail transportation improved at the end of the nineteenth century, Portner, like many owners and employees, did move his family away from the business and commuted when necessary. (Sanborn Map Company; Boyd’s Directory Company 1886; Portner n.d.:16)

Robert and Anna moved into the new house soon after their first child, Edwin, was born. The happy event turned very solemn, however, when Edwin died July 6, 1873, at less than five months old. Like most Victorians, the Portners were acquainted with death. But more children came in

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<sup>2</sup> The pages of Portner’s memoirs referring to his courtship and marriage are missing, reportedly torn out because a grandchild considered them too personal to be shared. (Portner 1992)

rapid succession, leaving little time to grieve. Robert Francis (“Robbie”) arrived on April 8, 1874; then Edward George (“Eddie”), November 14, 1875; Alvin Otto, June 12, 1877; Alma, July 10, 1879; Henrietta (“Etta”), November 5, 1880; Paul Valaer, January 22, 1882; Oscar Charles, November 11, 1884; Herman Henry, October 4, 1886; twins Clara Louise and Anna, May 23, 1888; Hildegard Rose (“Hilda”), December 19, 1889; and Elsa Eugenia, March 5, 1893.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it need not be pointed out, as did one observer, that Mrs. Portner “was a busy person.... She didn’t get out much; she had a large family [but she] had her servants.” But further demonstrating her overflowing love of children, Anna later donated time and money to support the George Garfield Hospital, Washington University Hospital, the Washington Home for Foundlings, and the German Orphans’ Asylum and served on the boards of lady managers of the last three. Robert cemented his relationships with friends, family and business associates by naming them godparents to his children. Godparents included brother-in-law and former associate Peter von Valaer; Rochester brewer Henry Batholomay; Wisconsin Congressman Richard Guenther and his wife; the wife of Emil Schandain, vice president of the Philip Best Brewing Company of Milwaukee; Carl Strangmann; B.E.J. Eils; Paul and Louise Muhluaser; John Leicht’s wife Eugenia; and Alexandria builder Emanuel Francis, one of the principals of the German Co-operative Building Association. (Portner n.d.:16,20,22,25; Manassas City Cemetery; Virginia Military Institute Archives; Manassas Museum; Bull Run Regional Library; Mills 1988; *Washington Post* March 6, 1904 and November 21, 1905; Gaines 2002:216)

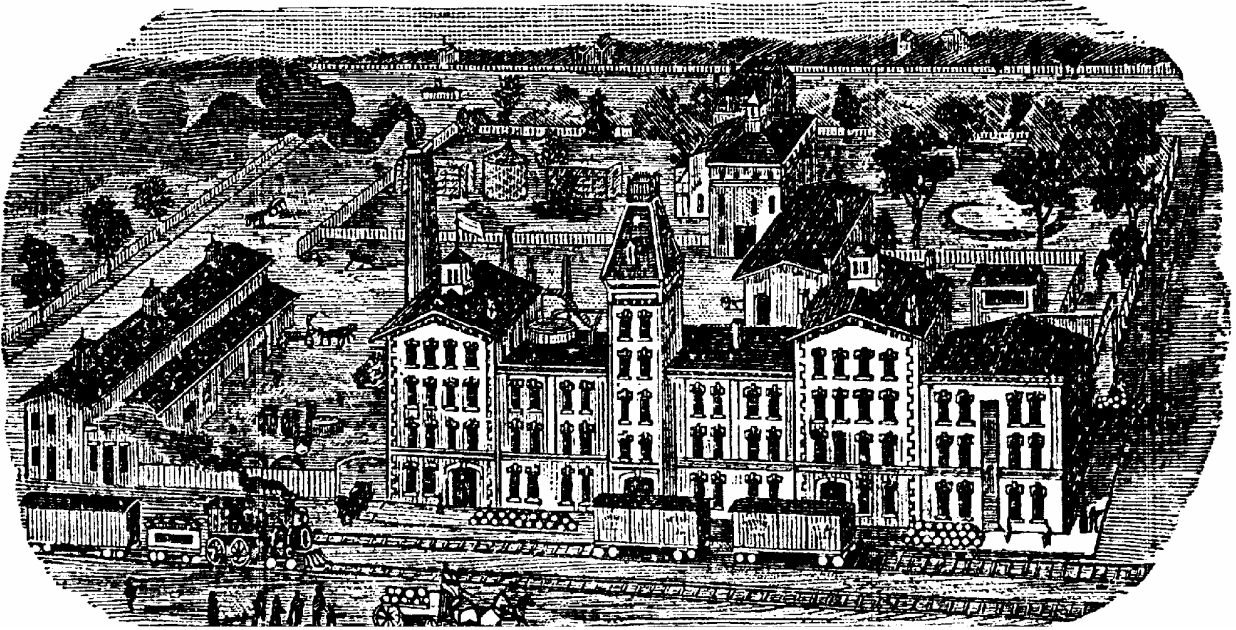
Although none died as young as Edwin, many of the Portner children who survived infancy passed away at unnaturally young ages even for that era, considering the resources available to a family of such wealth. Clara died at age ten in early 1899, after suffering seven weeks with an intermittent fever. Robbie perished only a year later “of exhaustion as a consequence of hemorrhages, after an illness of seven weeks.” On February 9, 1916, Herman succumbed to pneumonia, a complication of injuries sustained in a New York auto accident. Eddie died the next year, and Paul passed on Halloween 1919 after an extended illness. Oscar suffered a fatal heart attack exactly five years after Eddie’s death. Alvin was the longest-lived son, reaching the ripe “old” age of 54 in 1931. His sister Alma passed away the same year. The younger Portner girls lived the longest, some until the mid 1960s. (Portner n.d.:32; *Alexandria Gazette*, January 17, 1899; Virginia Military Institute Archives; Manassas Museum; Bull Run Regional Library)

Despite the frightful mortality, when this playful and sometimes mischievous tribe of children was young, life was all bustle and movement. By 1882 Robert had decided to build larger quarters for the expanding family nearer to his Washington business interests. He bought a lot at 1104 Vermont Avenue for \$2.00 per square foot the following spring and commenced to build a house there. Four stories tall, 35 feet wide and 40 feet deep, its fourteen-inch-thick brick and stone walls were erected by the crew of builder Alex Lyles according to plans drawn by Clement A. Didden.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Robert also purchased a parcel in Manassas, an estate off Main Street that he christened “Annaburg.” The name honored both his *alma mater*, the Saxon military academy, and his wife. Annaburg steadily grew as Portner purchased adjacent farms, homesteads and woodlots: “At the

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<sup>3</sup> In the choice of names, particularly middle names, the Portners honored both Anna’s family and Robert’s father, mother and brothers.

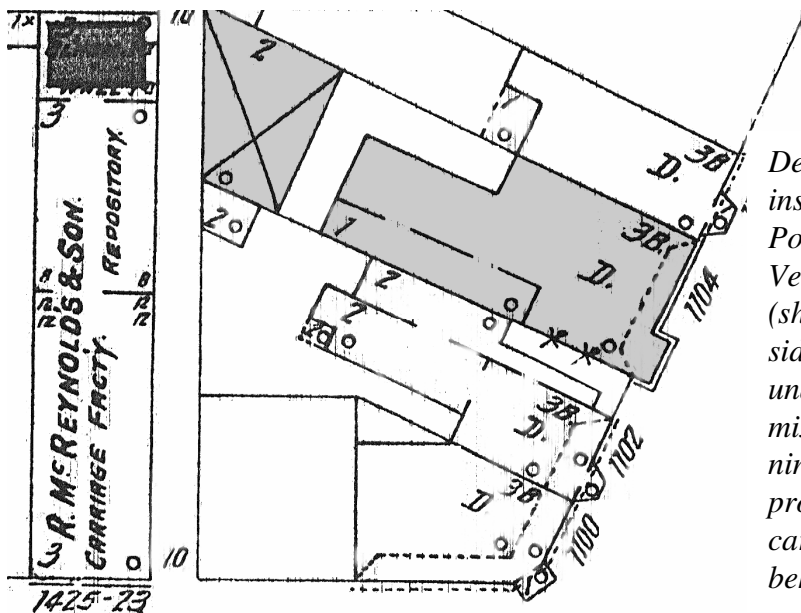
<sup>4</sup> Although the Washington house was already large, the Portners added a wing in 1897.



*A bird's-eye view of the Portner brewery from the 1886 Washington city directory. The Portner house stands behind the brewery. Portner's summer garden was on that side of the block as well, in what became the Portner family's garden. Among features of the garden was a cast-iron fountain shipped from New York.*



*Portner family portrait circa 1895. Courtesy of the Manassas Museum.*



Detail of a 1903 Sanborn insurance map showing Robert Portner's 1883 home at 1104 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington (shaded). When it was erected, that side of the block was relatively undeveloped. Indicative of the mixed uses found together in the nineteenth-century city is the proximity of the house to a carriage factory and livery stables behind on Vermont Court.

same time I kept on buying real estate adjoining Annaburg, especially when it was very cheap. This will also be a good investment for you, children, and I like to do it." Most of the land was assembled in the 1880s, but additions continued until the estate encompassed about 2,500 acres near the turn of the century. One of the core parcels was the property of Christian Mathis, whom Portner owed for the introduction to his future wife. The land ultimately included parts of the "lower Bull Run Tract," patented by Robert "King" Carter in 1724; the McLeans' "Yorkshire" tract upon which the First Battle of Bull Run was fought; and the Liberia estate, headquarters of Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard at First Bull Run and of Union General Irwin McDowell in 1862. The Portners spent pleasant summers in the old Mathis house before moving it in order to use its site for a new home. (Portner n.d.:18-19,25,27,37; District of Columbia Building Permits; Killmer 1984:2; *Evening Star* April 25, 1883; Bushong 1965; Tyler 1909: 353; Potomac Press 1908:376; *Manassas Journal* June 1, 1906)

Plans for the Annaburg mansion, drafted by Oscar Vogt, were ready at the beginning of 1892. Preparations included the purchase of the quarry of the Mayfield Brown Stone Company a half-mile east of town. With the brownstone and brick and oak lumber that had seasoned on the site for a few years, the crews of local builder John Cannon and mason David Muddiman erected a three-story, 35-room, Colonial Revival mansion with servants' quarters,<sup>5</sup> "deep and extensive" wine and beer cellars, a game room, electric lights, indoor plumbing, and a coal-fired heating system—in all, said to be worth \$100,000. Edgar J. Hulse was responsible for the architectural metal work. Perhaps not surprising, an air-conditioning system, consisting of iced water circulating in through-wall pipes, was installed to fend off the stifling Virginia summer heat. "You noticed it as soon as you stepped in the front door; it was like an ice box." The family moved into the completed house on June 9, 1894. (Killmer 1984:2; Muse 1975; Portner n.d.:24,25,26; *Washington Post* April 12, 1892 and February 7, 1935; *Mercantile Illustrating Co.* 1894:164; Conner 1977)

<sup>5</sup> Some servants were housed in dwellings built by Portner along Main Street. (Mills 1988)

Robert also oversaw the design of a 250-acre forested deer park; three artificial ponds, the largest of which was used for boating, and all stocked with tropical fish and bass “literally jumping” and home to swans and ducks; barns and stables; a carriage house; a dairy and a small winery; a gate house; a swimming pool; a bath house; a windmill; a greenhouse; flower and vegetable gardens; and more than 40 acres of vineyards for the enjoyment of his family. Perhaps the most unusual structure was a medieval stone folly or ruin, purportedly a replica of an old tower Mrs. Portner admired on her many trips to Europe with her husband. Thirty feet tall and completed even before the mansion, the tower was a Manassas landmark until its demolition in the late 1970s. It served “mostly as a museum,” housing “bits of cannons and cannon balls and other residue of the battlefield near-by which had been dug up by farm machinery,” but the top of which was “sought as an elevated beer garden” during the summer. (Killmer 1984:2; *Washington Post* December 3, 1895 and February 7, 1935; Bushong 1965; Byrd n.d.; Mills 1988; Valaer 1969)

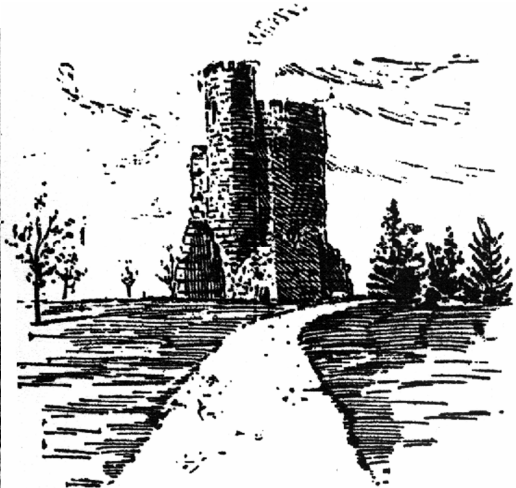
Mr. Portner must have been a man of unusual mental capacity to plan and carry forward all the beauties of this estate. The Park was a retreat for the Town’s people winter and summer. There was little for entertainment compared to this day and time so the Park was Utopia. There were no automobiles, people walked, this was a diversion, a mile or so was not a hardship but a pleasure. Boy and girl would stroll through the Park and maybe hide away in the summer house for a little romance. In winter a great sport was ice skating on the pond in the Park. (Byrd n.d.)

At least one local African-American church used the ponds for baptisms. And,

[a] very tall boy from Manassas boy from Manassas used to come to swim at Annaburg; he was over seven feet tall. Also a Manassas policeman came to swim. He was Manassas’ only cop and he never made an arrest. He was known as the “bull” [and] was one of Portner’s best friends in Manassas. Will Meredith, the Virginia Congressman’s son, came also to swim but mainly to see Etta whom he married. He became very important to the Portner family, especially after Mr. Portner died, and... [Mrs. Portner] depended on him very much. (Valaer 1969)

After a 1902 hunting excursion near Manassas, President Theodore Roosevelt returned to Washington *via* a tour through the Annaburg grounds. And a 1911 Civil War reunion at Manassas took place partly on the Portner estate, the occasion for President Taft and Virginia Governor Mann to lunch with the widowed Mrs. Portner. (*Washington Post* November 2, 1902; Work Projects Administration 1941:121)

Manassas residents were undoubtedly grateful for such access to the grounds, but there was liable to be some friction attributable to differences in economic class and to the fact that Mr. Portner created from beer profits such a large estate in the increasingly prohibition-minded Virginia countryside. “One thing I remember about the Portner boys was that they were kind of wild. The Portner boys had a club house [on the estate]. All of the folks looked askance because they knew that they drank and they knew that they gambled [there].” (Mills 1988; Valaer 1969)



*Clockwise from upper left: postcard image of the Annaburg house; rendering of the tower from the Manassas Journal (1905); and postcards of the tower and the estate entrance gate.*



For several years Portner shipped many of the Ives, Norton, Martha and other varieties of grapes grown at Annaburg to Washington wine merchant Christian Xander, who pressed from them clarets and port. One of his ports, probably made from Annaburg-raised grapes, won a medal at the Paris Exposition of 1900.<sup>6</sup> The brewer also raised dairy cattle on the estate and tried in vain growing hops for his beer, but its main purpose was as a retreat. The family was very fond of riding and had a number of show, hunting, racing (harness and steeplechase) and draft horses in the stables as well

<sup>6</sup> Christian Xander's medal-winning port was probably of the 1893 vintage, a period during which Portner was known to be selling him grapes. Portner shipped ten tons of grapes to Washington in early September 1890, for instance, and the Manassas Museum collection includes a stencil used to mark crates shipped from Annaburg (*Alexandria Gazette* September 15, 1890; *Washington Post* July 23, 1893)

as Shetland ponies. The carriage house contained beautiful carriages and a pony cart for the kids. Entertainments included the occasional hayride. The Portners enjoyed hunting and kept hounds for the purpose. Robert imported German deer and purchased "local" and Western deer as game to supplement the native turkeys and quail. A number of the boys were later members of hunt and country clubs. (*Alexandria Gazette* September 15, 1890; Portner n.d.:30; Muse 1975; Byrd n.d.; Mills 1988; Valaer 1969; *Fairfax Herald* December 18, 1903; *Washington Post* July 23, 1893, December 3, 1895, April 24, 1898, August 21, 1901 and November 3, 1901; Southern Planter 1905:203; Virginia Military Institute Archives).

More than Germany or America as wholes, Annaburg became Robert Portner's true *Heimat* ("homeland"). While working on his memoirs, Robert addressed a letter to his children, as a sort of preface, in which he expressed his dream for the estate.

I've taken my beloved Annaburg and improved it and I will continued to do this to give you there a pleasant childhood and to have a real homeland which brings you all together and to refresh in you minds your childhood. This home I wish to reserve for you all. Those of you who feel tired or sick can return to this place and remember what a beautiful childhood, to regain health and refresh the spirit, and [that] those who have had a hard time in life should regain their strength for a new beginning. You all meet there once a year and take care that the PORTNER family maintains a good name in America. (Bull Run Regional Library)

The family often returned directly to Manassas after trips abroad and generally retreated there for the summer in April or May. Indeed, the Portners lived a peripatetic life, moving between Washington, Alexandria and Manassas, and even Europe. The children were certainly fortunate to be exposed to the beauty and educational opportunities of other climes. The whole family departed for Germany and Switzerland in April 1881 and visited the hometowns of both Mr. and Mrs. Portner. The return voyage on the steamer *Necker* was remarkable in two respects: the family had reason to fear for their lives, and they made the acquaintance of the former president of the Confederate States of America. After leaving Southampton, England for the Atlantic crossing, the ship entered a terrible late November gale.

For seven days the storm was stronger than any that the captain had ever encountered before. While we were sitting at table, a huge wave tore away the bridge, several life boats, and the navigation house. One man had both legs broken. [A]nother was thrown overboard, and when he had somehow got hold of a rope, was thrown back by the next wave. Another one was lost and never seen again. The nose of the first officer was fractured when he was thrown off the bridge. [One of our companions was Jefferson Davis<sup>7</sup> with his wife and his daughter, a nice girl of 18, who had been in Germany for six years (at school in Karlsruhe). We became good friends with the family, mainly on account of the terrible storm...] Another wave swept across the ship and brought so much water into the smoking lounge that all of us, including Jefferson Davis, had to climb on the tables. Eddie, who was

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<sup>7</sup> Soon after this return to the United States, former Confederate General Joseph Johnston accused Davis of having stolen the Confederate treasury at the end of the war. (Strode 1966:515)

with me at the time, became so afraid that he kneeled down on a bench and prayed: “Dear God, please let the waves go down so that the ship won’t go down with Mamma and Papa.” He prayed so fervently that everyone present, including Jefferson Davis, was really touched. Davis said if God would not listen to such a fervent prayer, praying could not help at all.... It looked terrible when the water, which was two feet deep, was moving back and forth. The steerage passengers were also several feet deep in the water. (On this occasion, Alvin said that now he really needed boots.) All the exits to the decks were nailed down... We made little progress; one day we merely covered 60 miles. After a week, when we approached Newfoundland, it became better. After seventeen days we reached New York. Here I was welcomed by a delegation of the brewers of New York and invited generously to the Hotel Rush. Jefferson Davis joined us there in a glass of champagne. (Portner n.d.:17-18)

When they finally arrived at Alexandria, Portner’s friends and employees threw a large reception. “There were wreaths everywhere, and thousands of people had gathered.” “The grounds surrounding the brewery were illuminated and gaily decorated. A bon-fire was lighted, and a large number of fireworks were displayed.” (Portner n.d.:18; *Alexandria Gazette* December 10, 1881)

The Portners spent the winter of 1881-1882 in Atlantic City, New Jersey and the summer at Annaburg. Members of the family traveled to Bermuda at the end of 1886, to Germany and Switzerland again in the spring of 1887, and to Cuba and the Bahamas in early 1888. In the fall of 1889 the Portners decided to return to Germany and remain there for two years. They rented a home at “Schiffgraben 42” in Hanover. One reason for the trip had been to select quality German schools for the education of the children. The older ones were sent away to academies in Osnabrück, Pyrmont, and Ostrau, but the parents were not always satisfied with the quality of the instruction. Daughter Hilda was born during this Hanover sojourn. The parents also took trips within Germany and to Italy, Denmark, France and Austria. On his way to Vienna, Robert made the acquaintance of the Prince of Lichtenstein. (Portner n.d.:18-23)

[He] had stayed at the same hotel in Venice as I, and he had sat opposite me at the *table d’hôte*, so that I suspected him to be an officer in civilian clothes, or some high official. He was very tall and had such a beautiful waistline that the American lady next to me asked me if he were not laced<sup>8</sup>.... Afterwards, I saw the gentleman and his valet looking for [a private train compartment]. As he could not find one which suited him, I offered him a seat in mine, which he accepted gratefully.... He said at once, “You are an American. At the table, I often heard you talk with the ladies about America.” He told me that his brother had also been there once and that he was very enthusiastic about this country.... [W]e had a nice conversation and became very friendly with each other. As it became very cold, he offered to share his fur coat with me, which I gratefully accepted. We talked about our families and other personal problems, but he did not tell me his name.... [W]hen we arrived [at the border], the highest officials received him at the door of the train, and the

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<sup>8</sup> That is to say, corseted.

conductor said, “Your Highness, the sleeper is ready.” They bowed so much that I thought to myself that the people in Austria must be very friendly because they even addressed me as “Highness.” My companion answered the conductor, “All right, but I also want a compartment in the sleeper for this gentleman.” My trunk passed the customs officials unopened, and I was told that everything was all right—Highness. We had dinner together and then went into the sleeper which we and the valet had all for ourselves. I realized from all the compliments which were paid him by the officials that he was some high person. When I asked the conductor, he told me that he was the richest man in Vienna, the Prince of Lichtenstein. We kept on conversing for a long time and then went to bed. But I did not hand him my card, since I did not feel like addressing him as your Highness. The next morning, I awoke so late that the train had already entered Vienna. He came into my room when I was not quite dressed and bid me good-bye. I hurried as much as I could, but I only saw him leave in a beautiful coach, from where he nodded to me. (Portner n.d.:22-23)

The family had friends in the U.S. legations of Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Belgium and France, and socialized and even traveled with some of the diplomats. (*Washington Post* January 27, 1901 and December 18, 1901)

In January 1895 Robert took Eddie on a trip to “the Orient,” stopping at the Azores, Madeira, Gibraltar, Algiers, Genoa, Nice, Monte Carlo, Malta, Alexandria, Cairo, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Smyrna, Athens, Constantinople, Messina, Palermo, Naples, and Pompeii. Robert and Anna and some of the children returned to Germany in 1896, 1897, 1898, 1900, 1901 and 1902, with side journeys to France, Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia, Holland, Belgium and England. Robert, Alma, Etta and Paul shared a Caribbean cruise in early 1901. (Portner n.d.:27-34; *New York Times* April 9, 1896)

The family also vacationed closer to home in California, at Niagara Falls, Palm Beach, and Hot Springs and Old Point, Virginia. (*Alexandria Gazette* November 25, 1880; *Washington Post* December 7, 1900, January 12, 1902, March 5, 1902 and May 8, 1904)

Many of the trips and family retreats to Annaburg were undertaken for the express purpose of allowing Robert Portner the time and relaxation to recuperate from his recurring illness. He had chronic, unnamed problems which were apparently related to “mental stress,” overwork, and “over-reaction of nerves.” As early as 1863, Robert left for Germany to visit his mother and to recover from what he thought was malaria. He was already overworked when cajoled into accepting the presidency of the United States Brewers Association in 1880; he resigned after less than a year and left “on doctor’s advice” for Germany. “I intended to stay away for one year. When I left Washington, I weighed only 131 pounds. When I arrived fifteen to twenty days later in Rahden, my weight had already increased by fifteen pounds, and I felt much better.” After his return to the U.S., Robert soon “became nervous again and was not able to work.” He reported that even by the mid 1880s, “my health was not improving, [and] I could not very well look after my business and only attended to the most necessary affairs.” The stay in Hanover was meant “partly to recover my health, partly to send the children to school there.” While in Germany, Robert practiced “Swedish gymnastics” and rode horses for exercise. He also “took the waters” at the hot mineral baths of Bad

Kissingen and visited a number of doctors. Professor Ebstein performed a four-day check-up, pronouncing him basically healthy but overworked. The doctor prescribed a diet consisting of a quarter-pound of butter a day, “little bread, and otherwise meat, fresh vegetables and fruit.” By 1892, at the age of 55, he felt “better and healthier than I have in years.” The years had taken their toll, however. Robert began to have bouts of rheumatism. It did not slow him down much, but he spent less time at his Alexandria brewery. By early 1902 he recognized that “My state of health is not very good. I feel that I am getting old and shall not hold out much longer.” In fact, “he was very sick nearly all the time.” (Portner n.d.:8,17-22,27,30,33,34; *Alexandria Gazette* February 22, 1881; Valaer 1969; *Washington Post* August 9, 1887)

Robert did his best to prepare his children for a future without him. In his memoirs, he refers frequently to their education. He does not seem to fit the stereotype of the stern German father, perhaps because his children were allowed to run “wild,” because he apparently allowed them to choose their own universities, and because he was not too strict when they changed their minds about schools or were even expelled. In his memoirs he expresses affection for all, but because they were expected to carry on his various enterprises, this Victorian father discusses the activities of the boys much more than the girls. Son Herman receives little mention. Still a teenager at the close of his father’s memoirs, he was the one son who did not carry on with one of the family businesses. He may have been the “black sheep” of the family.<sup>9</sup> Each of the other boys, it seemed, followed a particular pursuit that fit well into the constellation of Portner family interests. Robbie shared his father’s inventiveness. After having demonstrated an aptitude for taking apart the family’s electrical appliances, building microphones, etc., he attended the Virginia Military Institute, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and finally, Washington’s Columbian College (now the George Washington University) for electrical engineering. It is said that he installed the light fixtures in the Alexandria brewery and the electrical and heating systems for the Portner Flats. Robbie and his brothers were characterized as “expert pyrotechnists” for their 1897 Independence Day fireworks display at Annaburg. By 1898 Robbie began working at both the Alexandria brewery and for the Capital Construction Company. The eldest surviving son, he seems to have been his father’s pride and joy—able, “active and energetic,” he would likely have been heir to many of his father’s interests. Robbie’s early death, however, crushed Robert. “He was a good and noble boy, and I do miss him very much.” (Portner n.d.:26, 31,32; Conner 1977; Virginia Military Institute Archives; Valaer 1969; Boyd’s Directory Company 1900; *Alexandria Gazette* January 23, 1900; *Washington Post* July 7, 1897)

Eddie, only nineteen months younger than Robbie, was like his brother’s twin. He shared a curiosity about electronics and went with Robbie to M.I.T. He then attended either the Siebel Institute or the Wahl-Henius Institute for brewing in Chicago, before leaving when taken ill with an ear infection. He finally earned a degree in chemistry from Columbian College in 1897. The same year, Robert Portner appointed Eddie vice-president of the brewery and generally left him alone to have the opportunity to conduct much of the firm’s business. Eddie was then placed on the board of the Capital Construction Company and was manager of the Portner Flats from at least 1902.<sup>10</sup> In spite of his many duties, he pursued his doctoral degree in chemistry from M.I.T., performing

<sup>9</sup> In Portner’s will, one of the sons was threatened with losing his inheritance if he married the “wrong” girl.

<sup>10</sup> The *Journal of the Society of Chemical Industry* indicates that Eddie was still principally employed with the brewery when he joined the Society in 1904.

laboratory research at the brewery while working on his dissertation. He became “a chemist of standing” in Washington, presenting with P. Froman before the chemical society, for instance, a paper upon “The Action of Ammonium Chloride upon Tetra and Penta-Chlorides...” After the death of his father, Eddie assumed the presidency of the brewery and held that position until about 1910. He left to become president of the Capital Construction Company in which capacity he served until his 1917 death. (Portner n.d.:26,33; Virginia Military Institute Archives; *Washington Post* June 10, 1897, November 10, 1899, June 5, 1915 and December 16, 1917; J.H. Chataigne & Co. 1897; Valaer 1969; Boyd’s Directory Company 1901; Boyd’s Directory Company 1910; W.L. Richmond 1903; W.L. Richmond 1907; Alexandria Corporation Court Charter Book 3:27)

Oscar Portner apparently worked on and off in the brewery for a few years after his father’s death. He would serve as president of the Prohibition-era family feed business. Cousin Peter Valaer, Jr., nearly the same age, held him in high regard. “He was the nicest and kindest person I ever knew (like a brother). His sisters always said he was the sweetest of all their brothers and always so kind to them.” Oscar pursued a career in real estate and left a \$150,000 estate. He lived in Washington’s tony Sheridan-Kalorama neighborhood and, like many of his brothers, was well known as a horseman. (Valaer 1969; *Washington Post* December 6, 1924)

Alvin may have been the superior businessman and, at least in that way, more like his father. He was educated at the Danville Military College, M.I.T., and the University of Virginia, studying science, liberal arts and law and earning a Bachelor of Law degree. He began practicing as an attorney in Washington in 1899 and partnered with Lee Trinkle, a former governor of Virginia for a period. For a brief time his father secured a position for him at the American Security and Trust Company. In 1901 he was “elected” president of the Portner Brown Stone Company and vice-president of the Capital Construction Company. He became vice-president of the Robert Portner Brewing Company under Eddie, before replacing his elder brother around 1910 and serving as president of the brewery and its successor corporation. With the deaths of his brothers, most of the family’s primary interests were united under Alvin’s control; president of the Capital Construction Company and Robert Portner Corporation, he was also vice-president of the Portner Realty Company. He was also a partner in Washington’s Bellevue Hotel. At the time of his father’s death, Alvin was a Manassas town councilman and served on the Council’s construction committee. Unlike his father, he became a staunch Democrat. He was also a director of the Alexandria Electric Company around 1910-1911. An avid sportsman, he was prominent in yachting circles and maintained a large horse stable in Virginia and a membership in the Racquet Club. His family resided at the Portner Flats and a summer home on South River near Annapolis. Alvin died in 1931, leaving a \$140,000 estate. (Virginia Military Institute Archives; Portner n.d.:34; Boyd’s Directory Company 1910; Hill Directory Company 1915; Alexandria Corporation Court Charter Book 3; *Manassas Journal* August 10, 1906; *Washington Post* June 5, 1905, February 17, 1910, June 29, 1911, October 18, 1912, November 2, 1920, January 21, 1926 and December 20, 1931)

During the first years of the twentieth century, the other boys were still in school, too young to follow in their father’s footsteps, but old enough to be fully sensible of the loss of their father. Robert Porter had been ill during much of 1905. The family rented out the Vermont Avenue house and moved to a more fashionable address at 1410 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW for the winter. Robert’s sickness prevented the family from visiting during the social season. In May 1906, he contracted a bronchial



*Left: One of the last photographs of Robert Portner, from The City of Washington, Its Men and Institutions, published in 1903.*

*Right: Robbie Portner as a V.M.I. cadet, 1893. Courtesy of the Virginia Military Institute Archives.*

ailment. As was his habit, he left for Manassas to recuperate. While at his beloved Annaburg on May 28, the 69-year-old, self-made millionaire departed this life. Robert Portner was buried with Masonic honors in the Manassas Cemetery, where much of the family now lies in the shadow of a massive rose granite obelisk. He left an estate of \$1,900,000, mostly in the form of stocks and bonds, principally in his two brewery properties, the Capital Construction Company, and various financial institutions.<sup>11</sup> He had divested himself of direct ownership in most of his real estate, except for the Vermont Avenue house and Annaburg, the former now valued at \$40,000 and the latter at \$100,000. He owed \$40,000. Robert bequeathed most of this estate, including the use of the residences, to his devoted wife, Anna, in trust for the remainder of her life. The children received one-tenth shares of the remainder of the estate, valued at about \$46,000 each in 1916. He also left annuities for his only surviving brother, Otto, and for his sisters, Augusta and Felixine. (*Washington Post* November 7, 1905, January 10, 1906, June 21, 1906 and March 11, 1916; *The Brewers' Journal* July 1, 1906; *Manassas Journal* June 1, 1906; Conner 1977)

Ever the civic-minded philanthropist, Robert provided \$5,000 for the paving of Manassas streets and \$5,000 worth of National Bank of Manassas stock for the support the town's poor, with a third of the proceeds of its investment to go to impoverished African Americans. Another \$5,000 went to the erection of a new Masonic hall for the town, the old one having been destroyed by fire the year before. "Those who knew Mr. Portner best know that his recent bequests were not the only

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<sup>11</sup> Another article, with information drawn from legal documents, set the Portner estate's net worth at \$1,035,000. (*Washington Post* March 11, 1916)

generous and liberal deeds done at this place. His unassuming manner made no parade when he was living. Respect for his memory should tell it modestly now.” (*Washington Post* January 10, 1906 and June 8, 1906; *Manassas Journal* June 1, 1906)

Indeed, perhaps the best memorial of his life was Robert Portner’s generosity. In life, he and Anna made substantial contributions to the Alexandria Infirmary, the Washington Hebrew Fair, the Washington Symphony, the National Educational Association Convention, the District of Columbia Citizens Relief Association, the Washington Home for Foundlings, the German Orphans’ Asylum, and the Associated Charities of Washington. Portner paid for the steeple of Alexandria’s German Lutheran church and supported relief funds for the victims of the Civil War, the Johnstown flood and the Franco-Prussian War. He also supported the institutions at which his children were educated. He and Anna bestowed gifts on the George Washington University (Columbian College) and its hospital. A science laboratory at the Holton-Arms School—*alma mater* of some of his daughters, granddaughters, great-granddaughters and great-great-granddaughters—is named for Robert. His sportive side was responsible for donations to the Regatta Association of Fredericksburg, and an interest in exotica resulted in a posthumous gift of an alligator to the Smithsonian’s National Zoo!<sup>12</sup> (*Washington Post* January 17, 1886, June 11, 1889, March 30, 1893, January 11, 1898, February 21, 1900, December 7, 1901, May 20, 1902, April 5, 1903 and July 13, 1912; *Washington Times* February 8, 1904; *Alexandria Gazette* June 15, 1880; Smithsonian Institution 1917:84)

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<sup>12</sup> The alligator was likely a souvenir of a trip to Florida and perhaps kept at Annaburg well after Robert’s death.